

A Nightmare on Elm Street or a Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood? High Density-Affordable Housing: A Law Enforcement Response

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The mere mention of high density-affordable housing development in some California communities might cause some to blanch. The thought of crowded apartments toppling a city's quality of life can raise eyebrows and stimulate lively discussion among community members, elected officials and law enforcement personnel. Some may be unaware how high density –affordable developments can impact the form and function of a city; others pant at the prospect of the financial floodgates opening to fill city coffers. Many will even privately cringe with fearful visions of increased crime and social disorder.

Proponents of high-density affordable housing believe it is an important and necessary element of smart growth in most communities across the state. Our look at high density-affordable housing will investigate both myths and facts related to the impact of high density affordable-housing. It will also propose a possible law enforcement response to the question: will high density –affordable housing development create a nightmare on Elm Street, or will it continue to be just another beautiful day in the neighborhood?

THE BASICS ABOUT HIGH DENSITY-AFFORDABLE HOUSING

Answering the question of why discussion on housing development in a city drums up a cadre of emotions for some residents is not a simple task. The term “high density-affordable housing” in and of itself is often confusing to many community stakeholders.

To begin to address the task at hand it will be important to define the term “high density - affordable housing” as used in this article.

High density –affordable housing is a compound word. The two concepts, affordability and density, are often defined separately. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development defines affordable housing as a household in which the family pays no more than 30 percent of annual income on housing costs. Families that pay more than 30 percent of their annual income are considered cost burdened and may have difficulty affording basic necessities such as food, clothing, transportation and medical care.¹ The definition of “high density” differs among California municipalities. In suburban areas, high density is defined as 30 to 40 dwelling units per acre, whereas in more urban areas, high density is often over 70 dwelling units per acre.² Simply stated, high density-affordable housing developments are those meeting both federal and state requirements for the number of units per acre and affordability based on family income.

While arriving at a basic understanding of the concepts behind the term “high density – affordable housing” is important, there is more depth and breadth to the issue. Research indicates housing, together with education and job creation, are the three necessary ingredients to sustain a high quality of life and a solid economy for California families.³ Accordingly, issues such as how housing affordability and density impact the California economic profile, as well as the role that housing development plays in local community structure, need to be addressed. A brief snapshot of California’s housing landscape will offer a more colorful picture of these issues.

CALIFORNIA'S HOUSING LANDSCAPE-A SNAPSHOT

High density-affordable housing developments have begun to appear on the California landscape for a variety of reasons. Two of the primary reasons for high density-affordable housing growth are tied to demographic and economic changes in the state.

A 2000 California Planning Roundtable report notes the past twenty years resulted in a variety of demographic and economic factors tied to population growth. In fact, the increasing cost in single family residential housing developments created a landscape where only one in five households can afford a typical single family home.⁴

The report also says that overcrowding in California doubled in the 1980's. Their findings concluded that, as of the year 2000, more than two million California households paid more than they could afford for housing. Complicating the issue, local government has limped along slowly in its efforts to respond to the housing crunch and population growth in California. As the state's economy began booming in the late 1990's and early 2000's, growth related problems have continued to worsen. ⁵

A 2003 report from the Public Policy Institute of California stated that by the year 2000, housing affordability problems were perceived to have reached crisis proportions in some areas. The report also highlights the fact that problems were especially bad in high-growth areas such as the Silicon Valley, where job growth outpaced housing growth nearly sevenfold from 1995 to 1999. ⁶

Today, economists believe the booming housing market is a significant driving factor in the national economy. According to an issue brief from the Center for Economic and Policy Research, home prices have risen by more than 45 percent since 1996 after adjusting for inflation. The housing bubble has created more than \$5 trillion in “bubble wealth” nationwide.⁷

In many California communities, an increasing segment of the population is unable to purchase a home. The lack of affordable housing in these communities translates to a crisis in available affordable rental housing throughout California.⁸ A California Housing Law Project article on multifamily housing emphasized the acute housing shortage means 45 percent of all renters pay more than half their income in rent. In Los Angeles County in 2000, there were 477,000 low income renters vying for 120,000 affordable units. In Orange County, four low income renters compete for every low- cost unit.⁹ In an effort to address these issues, California voters passed the Housing and Emergency Shelter Trust Fund Act of 2002, a \$2.1 billion dollar bond measure to provide millions of dollars to help fund the construction, rehabilitation and preservation of affordable housing, emergency shelters and homeless facilities.¹⁰

As high density-affordable developments are built up and down the state, some cities may find themselves in transition. The rolling fields and hills, running creeks and open farm land, associated with semi-rural charm have begun to yield to planned parks and greenbelts surrounded by concrete town homes.

This transition is often eschewed by residents who see these developments as changing their semi –rural community atmosphere to a more urban –like metropolis. Unfortunately, State and federal legislation such as the Housing and Emergency Shelter Trust Fund Act of 2002, along with the emerging demographic and economic factors in California, create a reality where high density –affordable housing is already a topic of conversation.

MYTHS AND MISUNDERSTANDINGS:

Community conversation regarding high density –affordable housing development raises questions and stirs myths and misunderstandings regarding just what it would mean for the future of those towns whose civic leaders want to allow housing development and population growth. Inquiring stakeholders want to know; will all the beautiful green space disappear? Will they build condos and town homes in the nice part of town? How will our school's scores be impacted by the kids who live in affordable housing? What about increased crime, traffic and even possible racial tensions? The answers to these questions are not simple. In reality, each carries deeper issues on its back. Additional worries such as community stability, freedom from crime and quality of life concerns are all a part of the landscape surrounding the development of high density-affordable housing. These same issues also have a nexus to the mission of local law enforcement.

The Law Enforcement Code of Ethics teaches officers their fundamental duty is to serve mankind and safeguard life and property. In day-to-day police operations, this concept generally translates to officers in the field responding to calls for service, apprehending offenders and participating in activities that prevent crime and civil disorder.

In addition to the basics of police patrol work, since the late 1980's departments throughout the state began to place an emphasis on problem solving as a policing strategy. 11 As cities and towns grew, police leaders found themselves questioning the impact of high density-affordable developments along with the rest of the community. In the world of public safety and police; unanswered questions always require follow up investigation.

High density-affordable housing often elicits responses from citizenry based on myths associated with such developments. In addition to local opposition, law enforcement agencies often decry additional development due to the belief that high density housing will generate additional calls for service, raise crime rates, and compromise officer safety. The following myths as listed in the 2000 California Planning Roundtable Report are common in the arguments against high –density housing development. 12

1. *High density housing is affordable housing; affordable housing is high –density housing*
2. *High density and affordable housing will increase traffic*
3. *High density development strains public service and infrastructures*
4. *People who live in high density-affordable housing will not fit into the fabric of the existing community*
5. *Residents of high density housing frequently change residences causing neighborhood instability*
6. *Affordable housing reduces property values*
7. *High density-affordable housing undermine community character*

8. *High density-affordable housing increases crime*

The first myth does contain some truth in the fact that more units per acre means lower land cost per unit. The fact is that to encourage housing affordability, California cities need to promote higher densities. A second point of clarification surrounding this myth lies in the fact that not all high density housing is affordable to low -income families. There are many examples from San Francisco's' Nob Hill, Los Angeles Wilshire Corridor and San Jose's and Morgan Hill's pending Coyote Valley Development. The bottom line regarding this myth is that in recent years, density has proven not to be enough to ensure affordability.

The second myth regarding traffic congestion is inaccurate because studies demonstrate that people who live in high density -affordable housing own fewer cars and drive less. Two -thirds of renters and three-fourths of households living below the poverty line own no vehicles or only one car, compared to 54 percent of all households and 44 percent of single homeowner households. In 1980, the Metropolitan Transportation Commission in San Francisco found that low-income households made an average of 3.6 trips per day, compared to 6.8 trips per day for medium-income and 9.9 trips per day for high- income households.

Mixing housing with commercial and retail development can also encourage retail development and ease walking and transit use. In areas of high density housing, stores serving those neighborhoods make it easier for residents to walk to buy groceries or go to the dry cleaner instead of driving or taking public transportation.

The third myth theorizes that high density affordable-housing will strain public services and infrastructures. In reality, high density developments require less extensive infrastructure networks than does sprawl. California developers are generally required to pay for sufficient infrastructure capacity to serve their own projects. High density housing also can save new residents money when they allow housing construction where infrastructure service capacity is yet to be used or has already been paid for.

The fourth myth, which can be interpreted to carry racial or social class discriminatory overtones, asserts that people who live in high density housing won't fit into certain pre-existing neighborhoods.

According to government definitions of affordable housing, families should devote no more than 30 percent of their income to rent or mortgage payments. Affordable housing simply means that people don't pay too large a share of their income to mortgage. This fact alone means that people who live in "affordable" housing already live in a community with single family home dwellers. For example, an elementary school teacher living in Santa Clara County with a gross monthly income of about \$3,000 per month can afford to pay \$900 per month in rent or mortgage, which qualifies as low-income if the teacher lives alone. If the salary must support other family members, the family would be considered "very low" income. These parameters would also mean many nurses, librarians, counselors, police officers and other public service workers generally qualify for some level of high density-affordable housing.

The fifth myth asserts that residents of affordable housing move too often and destabilize the community. While statistics show that renters do move more often than homeowners, a study by San Francisco's Bridge House indicates that when rents are guaranteed to remain stable, tenants move less often. In fact, annual turnover in their affordable housing projects is less than 10 percent annually.

The sixth myth used to oppose high density-affordable housing development is that affordable housing in a community reduces single family property values. In a 1980 study of the Bridge House Projects, only one of them had any value on nearby property value. The affordable housing development actually increased property value. An additional 13 of 14 studies throughout the mid to late 1980's demonstrated that high density affordable-housing had no negative effect on property values. Throughout the 1990's, cities such as Irvine California continued to develop model planned- affordable housing communities. According to the Roundtable Report, these outstanding community designs are credited with allowing essential members of the public service community the opportunity to enjoy Irvine's high quality of life.

Myth number seven states that high density-affordable housing undermines community character. The fact is that new affordable housing can differ little or not at all from other development. The Pickle Weed Development in upscale Mill Valley, and the Self-Help Project in Rancho Santa Margarita California are examples of local developers and sub-contractors contributing materials identical to those used in nearby market-rate homes. Experienced architects worked to develop these town homes so that they fit in perfectly with the surrounding neighborhoods.

These two developments alone are proof that affordable housing does not always equate with high rise slums. In fact, many cities statewide have an architectural handbook that requires developers to meet specific design standards that are important to that community's character and quality of life.

Myth number eight, which is prevalent in the law enforcement community, purports that high density-affordable housing causes a rise in crimes. To date, no study has demonstrated a direct correlation that ties population growth and housing density by itself to a rise in violent crimes. According to studies, resident's income may have a more direct correlation to crime than housing density.¹³

Interestingly, the 2000 California Planning Roundtable Report does suggest that cities would do well to spread out high density duplexes and town homes in order to reduce the potential for impact on police services. Conscientious property management and proper environmental design are touted as the key to maintaining low-crime neighborhoods in cities where high density-affordable housing is prevalent.

Separating myth from fact is important in community dialogue related to high density development. Nonetheless, certain facts still remain that necessitate a response from local government. Given the aforementioned trends related to job growth, demographic shifts, and the need for affordable housing development to keep pace with job growth, it is likely that more semi-rural communities having land available for development will continue to see high density-affordable properties become a part of their community landscape in the future.

It is also a widely accepted fact in law enforcement circles that any significant increase in population, coupled with burgeoning housing development, tends to increase service demands on police in regards to calls for service. Police leaders, therefore, must prepare for a safer tomorrow in their respective cities by developing a plan of action today.

A LAW ENFORCEMENT RESPONSE

Law enforcement agencies are action oriented by their very nature. It is important nonetheless for police leaders to plan and forecast the possible futures for their organizations. They need to recognize that accurately identifying and forecasting key trends and events is critical to an organizations' ability to influence desired change. ¹⁴ Given the noted issues, the first step to prepare a response to future events such as high density-affordable housing growth in a community should be to consider developing a plan of action that can have a long-term impact on the forecasted challenges.

The most effective way to successfully manage the construction of high density development in their communities would be for police leaders to engage in a strategic planning process designed to help members of and organization match their objectives and capabilities with the anticipated demands of the environment. This process results in a plan of action that will ensure that their objectives are achieved. ¹⁵

STRATEGIC PLANNING – AN EXEMPLAR

Successful strategic planning in police departments requires buy-in and cooperation from two main groups. First, staff from inside the agency must have the opportunity to develop a sense of ownership of the plan. Second, and equally important, community stakeholders need to provide critical input and perspective as the planning process moves forward. ¹⁶

In an effort to ensure this critical buy-in from inside the organization and external stakeholders, the Steiner Strategic Plan model recommends as the first step to develop a *planning/visioning team*. ¹⁷ This group should consist of five to seven individuals represented by sworn and non-sworn employees and selected members of the community. This team will craft a vision and set initial goals and objectives for the planning process.

The second step of this process focuses on *organization analysis* using the WOTS-UP framework (Weakness, Opportunities, Threats and Strengths-Underlying Planning).⁺

This framework identifies internal weaknesses and strengths inside the organization, and threats and opportunities from outside the organization. ¹⁸ The WOTS-UP analysis is issue-specific and should address the organization's ability to meet the goals and objectives associated with the high density-affordable housing issue. Analysis of organizational strengths and weaknesses can be achieved through surveys, interviews and meetings with various employee groups, community residents and other city staff.

Each of these stakeholder groups will identify specific concerns they have with the new affordable housing developments and offer viable solutions to achieve community success and safety. The third step in this process is *strategy development*. Here the focus of the planning effort begins to narrow to two or three broad strategies that can be

adopted to achieve the desired goals and objectives that were identified by the planning/visioning team.¹⁹ The final step of the strategic plan process is the *implementation phase*. This phase consists of outlining and assigning responsibilities, reviewing budget considerations and creating measurable criteria for ongoing evaluation.²⁰ A strategic plan for the mythical community of “Sleepy City” provides an example of a finished product.

SAMPLE STRATEGIC PLAN

VISION:

The Sleepy City Police Department will be strategically positioned to respond to the projected increase in high density-affordable housing in Sleepy City.

GOALS:

Goal: Efficient use of department financial resources to address future challenges in housing density and community change

Objectives:

- 1. Develop cost saving strategies*
- 2. Assess critical vs. non-critical services*
- 3. Create a population growth based staffing matrix*

Goal: Open communication with housing development stakeholders

Objectives:

- 1. Initiate communication with city housing and planning departments*
- 2. Develop a relationship with local housing developers*

3. *Train key department staff and Sleepy City stakeholders in Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design methods*

Organizational Analysis

WEAKNESSES:

1. Police staff associate high-density –affordable housing with gangs, drugs, and increase in crime.
2. The community is generally unaware of the potential impact that high density-affordable housing development will have on Sleepy City P.D.

STRENGTHS:

1. The Department has recently completed an analysis of non-critical services and ~~thus~~ decided to eliminate some to reduce the workload of current staff.
2. Sleepy City P.D. developed a number of cost- recovery strategies during the last budget cycle to be implemented at the start of the new fiscal year.

THREATS

1. Continual pressure from the Downtown Association for Sleepy City P.D. to address traffic, downtown crime, and other urban sprawl issues, forcing the Department to act outside its strategic plan.
2. Certain factions of the community espouse more rapid housing development in Sleepy City. If these groups are able to increase the pace of development, Sleepy City P.D. will fall further behind in its ability to offer the same level of quality police service.
3. Vulnerable neighborhoods might be negatively affected if existing Sleepy City P.D. resources are redirected to mitigate issues in additional high density-affordable developments. These vulnerable areas could fall into blight and potentially result in greater felony crimes.

OPPORTUNITIES

1. The development of a positive relationship with local housing developers could involve providing information on crime prevention through environmental design in the planning stages.
2. Community support for Sleepy City P.D. was last measured at approximately 80 percent. This is critical if the City were to decide to pursue a utility or public safety tax from the community.

Stakeholder Analysis

The following sample illustrates stakeholder recognition and identification of critical expectations associated with each stakeholder group.

1. The residents of Sleepy City

- a. Quality of life in the community will not deteriorate
- b. Crime rates will remain steady or decrease in spite of new development
- c. Police patrols will continue to be visible in all neighborhoods

2. The Sleepy City Downtown Association (DTA)

- a. Sleepy City P.D. will develop foot patrol for the downtown mixed use housing and commercial areas.
- b. Sleepy City P.D. response times to downtown calls for service will be rapid
- c. Sleepy City P.D. will help the DTA create a safe, pedestrian friendly downtown community.

3. Sleepy City P.D. Employees

- a. Concern that workload does not increase to an overwhelming level
- b. Field staff is adequate for officer safety
- c. City administration will increase department funding to meet the demands of housing and population growth.
- d. Ensure that new high density-affordable development design follows CPTED principles.

Sample Strategy

One of the preferred strategies to meet the Departments' objective of responding to the increase in high density-affordable housing developments was to form a Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) team.

This team consisted of three, trained staff members from the Department's Crime Prevention Bureau. Each would receive an introduction to the planning process by Business and Housing Services Department, attend their regular meetings and report back to command staff on relevant issues.

Implementation Phase

The steps of the implementation phase will not be discussed at length here since there are a number of different approaches based on agency needs.

If the strategic plan process is adopted and followed accordingly, then the support from City Administrators and City Councils should follow with a minimum of surprises for any stakeholder group. Of course, allaying fears of change in existing neighborhoods may create the necessity to sustain the dialogue amongst those responsible for leading the community through the transition process. A sound strategy, partnered with a commitment to listen to all quarters and work for the common good, should ensure the foundation for success is solid. Failing to address the issues noted in this plan, or plans of a similar nature created for your community, would only invite the dissent and disagreement natural for any "good idea" left untended.

CONCLUSION

Police leaders today have an awesome responsibility to prepare their agencies for continued growth and other challenges associated with that growth. This should be a rewarding experience that contributes to the legacy of each police leader and paves the way for his/her predecessor to chart their own course with ease.

Most community conversations concerning high density-affordable housing development drum up a wide variety of comment and concerns. Housing development and population growth can and do change the way cities look. It also affects how city departments function to serve the residents who live their communities.

Police departments will play a critical role in determining whether high density-affordable housing creates a “Nightmare on Elm Street” or if the new residences add to another beautiful day in the neighborhood. Law enforcement leaders are responsible to recognize future trends and events potentially impacting the quality of life in their cities. Therefore, they must remain tuned in to how housing density and population growth impacts social disorder, the quality of police service and how best to maintain low crime rates in the face of change. For most, it is not a matter of if, but when new high-density housing might become a factor in planning for the public’s safety. Astute management of the issue will ease tensions, allow for constructive conversations regarding the change, and also to help maintain the peace. And that, after all, is what we do in the first place.

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